

Pam  
LB. N  
W

CONCERNING THE  
OLDEST ENGLISH LITERATURE.

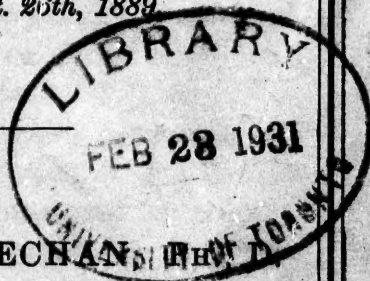
INAUGURAL ADDRESS

*Delivered at the Convocation of Dalhousie University,  
Halifax, N. S., Sept. 23th, 1889.*

BY

ARCHIBALD MACMECHAN

*Professor of English.*



HALIFAX:

PRINTED BY JAMES BOWES & SONS, 125 HOLLIS STREET.  
1889.

and of the  
author

THE  
OLDEST ENGLISH LITERATURE

BY  
J. R. R. TAYLOR

WITH  
AN INTRODUCTION BY  
J. R. R. TAYLOR

THE  
OLDEST ENGLISH LITERATURE

*Presented to the University of  
Toronto by the authors*

*Feb. 17. 1931*

## Concerning the Oldest English Literature.

---

It will not seem strange, or need any preface or apology, if in a seat of learning in the English colony which has always cherished the deepest reverence for the home-land, the attempt be made, however unskilfully, to portray what has ever been that home-land's crowning glory — her matchless literature. Changes which the keenest eye cannot now foresee, may push England from her proud position among the nations of the earth; her famous deeds in trade and colonization may be remembered only as we remember the enterprises of ancient Phœnicia and her long list of statesmen, warriors and heroes slip from the unretaining memory of coming ages: but her literature is imperishable. As long as human nature remains human nature, as long as beauty delights us and sad things move us to pity, so long must the names of England's greatest sons be held in loving remembrance. The world will not soon forget the men who told in English speech her Canterbury tales, and wove the glittering web of her romantic drama and sang of paradises lost and regained. And while the names of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton are

treasured, the name of the land that bore them must be revered. These are her builded memorial, more enduring than brass. It is not, however, of the three great periods of our literature, named from three great Queens, that I purpose to-day to speak. My theme is not the Carlyles and Tennysons of our own Victorian day, nor the intellectual giants of the Queen Anne era, nor "the spacious times of great Elizabeth." I wish to take you further back than the time of Chaucer even, back to the early dawn of civilization in Western Europe. It is the custom to speak of a stream of literature. Whatever its beginnings, English literature is now no rill or streamlet, but a very Amazon for grandeur, depth, and power. And while it might be not without interest to trace the wanderings of this mighty river, it is no part of my plan to do so, but I shall go at once to the very source, the fountain, the well-head where it took its rise. To continue the figure, it has not all flowed from one source: there have been many affluents and tributary streams of tendency all along its majestic course. There is the Norman flood meeting and flowing alongside, but not mingling, like the Ottawa beside the St. Lawrence. The effect of this confluence was incalculable. The united rivers flowed on with an impetus neither possessed by itself: but the English stream had



flowed for centuries in its own bed and between its own banks. In other words, there was an English literature, native to the soil, with its own history and development long before Duke William of Normandy stumbled and fell on Hastings beach, and in his fall grasped a kingdom. It is to this indigenous English literature, and to the oldest part of it, that I wish to call your attention.

At the very beginning of our enquiry we are beset by a difficulty about names. If the subject of this lecture had been announced as Anglo-Saxon Literature, you might have felt that it was something which concerned *only* special students in that department. But I felt sure that your interest would be awakened in any portion of our literature, however removed from our age and sympathies, which could justly lay claim to the title "English." It is because I wanted every lover of English literature to feel his right to every part of his vast and rich inheritance that I have chosen to call this particular period by a familiar name instead of one which sounds more learned, but is incorrect and misleading. It is not of a "Saxon" or "Anglo-Saxon" literature that I am going to speak, but of English and Old English. At first sight, it may seem absurd to hunt down a word, a mere part of speech: but many a misunderstanding has

been kept fresh for ages by a misused word : and this term "Anglo-Saxon" has done more mischief than any other I know in the way of confusing our notions about our own history and literature. This term is largely responsible for the vague idea that there is a language and history buried somewhere in the gloom preceding the Norman Conquest, much less closely related to ourselves than the language and history of Homer's Greeks. It has made us think of the first stage of our language as a foreign language. It is due to this that we think of our literature as a literature of shreds and patches, with sharp lines of division between grotesquely separated "periods," instead of what it really is, one great organic whole.

Let us briefly examine the history of this obnoxious term, and see by whom it has been used, and in what sense. First then ; it is popular usage. Nothing is commoner than to speak of the Anglo-Saxon people, the Anglo-Saxon language, the Anglo-Saxon literature : by which is usually meant the language and literature of the people inhabiting England between the 5th and 11th centuries. Up to the Norman Conquest they were Anglo-Saxons and then apparently, became something else. The practice dates from the revival of the study of our ancient language in the 17th century. A new interest was felt in

the doctrines and customs of the early church and this old literature was appealed to, by religious disputants. For instance the sermons of Aelfric, a bishop of the 11th century were quoted, as protesting against, what was in his day, an innovation, the Romish doctrine of Transubstantiation. The term "Saxon" was also used loosely, as synonymous with "Anglo-Saxon" and applied in the same general way. Both these terms have continued in use to the present time, but latterly "Saxon" has been superseded by "Anglo-Saxon."

As early as 1852, however, there was a protest. A hot-headed writer in the "Gentleman's Magazine\*" argues impetuously against this misnaming of our literature, our language, and ourselves. His argument is partially historical and partly based on the literary monuments. He finds, that of the three Low German tribes we believe to have settled in Britain, the Angles were by far the most numerous. They left their old home in a body, and according to the account in Bede† and the O. E. Chronicle‡, Anglia, *i.e.*, the territory of the Angles in Jutland was ever after their emigration, a waste. A glance at the map shows that, while the Jutes occupied the small county of Kent, and the

\* Gent. Mag., April, 1852, p. 321-8.

† Bede Hist., ed. Bohn, cap. XV., p. 24.

‡ A. S. Chronicle, ed. Bohn, 1847, p. 309.

Saxons the lands south of the Thames, the rest, and by far the greater part of what is now known as England, as well as lowland Scotland, was the domain of the Angles or Engles. We should expect that this territorial predominance would make the name of the Angles the most noted. Was it really so? We may ask, what was the language of these people? What did they call it themselves? Strange to say, there is no mention of "Anglo-Saxon." They call themselves and their language always "English," and nothing but English. We might naturally expect that men living in different parts of an island, and separated by differences of dialect, would give their language local names, just as now-a-days one particular dialect of English is always called Scotch. But this was not the case. We have the indirect testimony of a churchman and a king on this point. The Venerable Bede was a Yorkshireman, and wrote a church history in Latin. Alfred the Great spoke the idiom of the South, and translated Bede's history. They have both only one name for the language of all the tribes, and that is English. Further, an examination of our ancient laws proves that the only folk-group spoken of is ENGLAND, and the only folk-name of their law and language is ENGLISH. Again: the testimony of the coinages is unanimous. Of the thousands



of coins which have been found, not one bears the name "Anglo-Saxon," but English. The usual impress is "Rex Anglorum," "King of the English." When we come to examine the charters, however, we find a difference. The term "Anglo-Saxon" alternates with "English." But the language in which these charters were drawn up was Latin: their authors were foreign scribes, for whom the plain word English was not good enough, and the more high-sounding "Anglo-Saxon" was used instead. The first occurrence of the word is probably in the Latin life of Alfred, ascribed to Asser, in which the former is styled "Angul-Saxonum rex." This is late usage. To sum up briefly. The term used earliest, by the people themselves, and by far the most extensively, is English. The term used late, used sparingly, and by foreign scribes at that, is Anglo-Saxon. So far the Gentleman's Magazine.

One of our latest authorities in English history, Professor Freeman, has taken up the subject in his usual incisive fashion. The great contention of his somewhat noted history would seem to be, that the English race is essentially one from their first settlement in the island of Britain to the present day. To this end, he spends much labour in establishing a consistent nomenclature, which he is careful not to violate. His is the most temperate, the most careful, and

at the same time, most exhaustive statement of the case which has come to my notice. In his lectures on "The Origin of the English Nation\*," he has sketched his argument in a popular way, and elaborated it with more exactness and detail in his "History of the Norman Conquest†." He goes over much the same ground as the writer mentioned above, basing his reasoning on the Old English Chronicles, the usage of foreign writers, and the language of the charters. He not only makes good the claims of "English," but shows that the terms "Saxon" and "Anglo-Saxon" are inapplicable and out of place. The following citation from Sir Francis Palgrave‡, although applied primarily to history, puts in a very clear way, the reasons for calling ourselves, our language, and our literature by one name at all periods: "I must needs here pause," he writes, "and substitute henceforward the true and antient word English for the unhistorical and conventional term Anglo-Saxon, an expression conveying a most false idea in our civil history. It disguises the continuity of affairs and substitutes the appearance of a new formation in the place of a progressive evolution." There is other eminent authority in support of this view. Professor Henry Morley, of the Uni-

\* Harper's ed., p. 127.

† Oxford, 1873, vol. I., Ap. A.

‡ Normandy and England, iii., p. 596.

versity of London, makes this statement in his history of literature\*: "It is certain that these peoples when settled in Britain, however they may have accepted distinctions made to account for the names Angles and Saxons, all called themselves alike the English folk, and their language the Englisce Sprace, English." But it is needless to multiply quotation. The leading authorities are agreed that the practically invariable usage of the men who spoke this, so-called "Anglo-Saxon" was to call it "English." No one need stumble at the phrase "Old English" as applied to the earliest stages of our language, when we use without scruple the terms "Old French," "Old Norse," and so on. The case of German is in point. It is a sister language which has lost much in vocabulary, much in inflection; it has been much influenced by classic syntax, and there have been great influxes of foreign, particularly Romance words—so much so that a patriotic crusade has arisen against the *Fremdwort*. Yet no German dreams of denying his own connection with the past by calling his language in its first stages by another name. To him it is simply Old German. We perform that peculiarly English action of turning our backs upon ourselves by calling the first stages of our language "Anglo-Saxon."

---

\* English Writers, I., p. 226.

There is, then, analogy as well as historical accuracy on the side of "Old English." There are also practical advantages. We have a term which is simple and intelligible, which is at once adapted to popular use and "admits of scholarly definition." More than this, if this term is accurate, we perceive that there is no "new formation" but "a continuity of affairs," "a progressive evolution." We perceive that the period before the Norman Conquest is not to be cut off, as it were, from the rest of our literary history; that there has been no break with the storied past, but that English literature is English literature in the Ninth Century as well as the Nineteenth. That this is a most valuable point of view to gain, I need not stop to argue.

And do not think because ten centuries lie between that this oldest English literature is lacking in interest. The reverse is the case. No modern European literature is more interesting in its early growth. It is really not so far removed from our sympathies, for mankind is much the same in all ages. Coming down the mountain side, I saw a huge shape coming towards me in the morning haze; coming nearer, I saw that it was a man; nearer still, it was my brother. And so may we, across the mists of a thousand years still make out, in these old monuments, where writers of an elder time traced



their unconscious portraits, the faces of men with features not unlike our own.

What is, then, this Old English literature? What is its age, nature, and extent? So much time has been spent in determining the name, that I can only answer these enquiries briefly, and then glance hurriedly at some of the more beautiful passages in the works which have come down to us. None of the vernacular literatures of modern Europe is older than ours, dating as it does from the Eighth Century. It contains both prose and poetical monuments: heathen poems, Christian poems, riddles, translations, homilies, annals. The history of the nation is recorded in what is known as the OE. Chronicle. This was undoubtedly instituted by King Alfred the Great. Some of the entries describing events which took place long before the compilation began, sound like fragments of old war songs. For instance, under the date 473 we find this: "In this year Hengest and Esc fought against the Welsh and took countless booty, and the Welsh fled from the English as fire." We have translations from the pen of this great King, parts of which it would be fairer to call original compositions. These are accompanied by prefaces unconsciously portraying the character of the royal author, a character which a recent writer calls "the most

perfect" in all history\*. Turning to poetry, we find that, at the upspringing light of Christianity, the English heart burst forth into a rapture of song like a lark at sunrise. The new convert from heathendom laid hold of Scripture story or legend of saint, and turned them into spirited English verse. The most remarkable of these is the so-called Cædmon's Paraphrase, describing the Fall of the Angels and the consequent Fall of Man, which in general outline as well as in single passages corresponds to Milton's famous epic. We all remember the line—

" Yet from those flames  
No light, but rather darkness visible  
Served only to discover sights of woe." †

Cædmon says in his description of Hell—

" They sought another land  
That was emptied of light,  
That was filled with flame,  
Fire's horror huge."

Again, Milton describing Satan rising from the black pool, writes—

" On each hand the flames,  
Driven backward, slope their pointing spires, and roll'd  
In billows, leave in the midst a horrid vale." ‡

And the Old English singer has it—

" He dashed the fire in two  
With fiendish craft."

---

\* Freeman, Norman Conquest, vol. I., pp. 51-55.

† Par. Lost, I., 62-64.

‡ Par. Lost, I., 222-224.

It has been argued that Milton may have known of this poem through his friend Junius, the first publisher of *Cædmon*, and have borrowed lines from it just as he did from the classics. It seems at least probable.

But all these are less interesting than those remnants of an historic past that seemed even then far away and long ago. There was a world submerged when Christianity overspread Western Europe. It was the pagan Germanic world, but it had a civilization of its own, a philosophy and an unwritten literature. It was overwhelmed by a great flood of new ideas, and though little survived, we do possess curious flotsam and jetsam of that mighty world-wreck. Mouldy vellums found by chance on some island within the Arctic circle, or in some old monastery book-room, scraps of parchment covered with half-erased characters, binding some forgotten book, these are our treasures; for, from them, we painfully build again the vanished past. From a book of songs and a store-house of sagas we know with what eyes the Northmen looked out upon nature and life. We possess a cycle of ballads celebrating Siegfried, the winner of the Fairy Gold, and many a native legend done into Latin verse by Saxo Grammaticus and in monkish dress, the OE. epic of *Beowulf*.

---

§ Morley, *English Writers*, II., p. 109, f.  
 Earle: *Hist. of A. S. Lit.*, p. 112.

These only show how much we have lost. Alfred the Great, as well as Charlemagne, made collections of the vernacular songs and ballads, no doubt such as those we find inserted in the OE. Chronicle, and those worldly songs which induced the pious Otfried to write his harmony of the Gospels as an antidote. These collections are lost. The references are endless to manuscripts destroyed by accident, or by those who did not know their value, or to monkish zeal erasing the writing from parchments to make way for the barbarous Latin of some silly legend. We must be thankful, however, for what we have. The English collections, such as the Exeter song-book, and the Vercelli Codex, are among the most valuable. They form part of this Germanic world, but with a character of their own which I shall endeavour next to illustrate. Passing by some of the most interesting, such as "The Ruined City," which seems to link us with the last of Roman civilization in Britain, and "The Message of the Banished Man to his Wife" bidding her come to him over the seas at the first notes of the cuckoo, I shall take up a ballad of the tenth century. The poem in question is founded on an historic event in the unhappy reign of Ethelred the Uncounselled, when the Danes were harrying England in every direction and exacting tribute from



the imbecile king. That this was not the spirit of the people everywhere is shown by this incident. News was brought to Byrthnoh<sup>+</sup>, the *ealdorman*, or as we should say now, the lord-lieutenant of his county, that the Danes had plundered Ipswich and had moved their forces up to Maldon, where the river Panta divides. Their ships were moored in the stream, and they themselves were camped on the tongue of land between the forks. The poem gives an account of the opening parley, first on the English side. I cannot reproduce the music of the original or even the form of the poetry, but can only hope to give some idea of the spirit in a rough and ready prose version.

“There and the Byrhtnøht began to set his men in battle array: he rode down their ranks and counselled them: he taught his warriors how they should stand and hold their ground, and bade them that they should hold their bucklers aright, fast with fist, and be not afeared.

And when he had set that folk in fair array, he lighted down among his men where it liked him best, where he knew his house-carles were the dearest. Then stood forth on the shore and spoke up stoutly, the Vikings' messenger. He spoke words, he who, in boastful fashion announced the sea-farers' errand to the Earl, there where he stood on the shore.

"Dashing sea-rovers send me to thee, bade me say to thee that thou must quickly send us gold rings for safety: and better for ye is it that ye buy off this rush of the spears with tribute than than that we share in stern battle."——"

And there is more in the same insolent strain. Then,

"Byrthnoth made answer, he gripped his shield and swung on high his slender ashen spear: he spoke words, angered and single of mind: he gave him his answer. 'Listen thou sea-rover, what this folk saith: they will, for tribute, give you spears, the deadly point and ancestral sword, war-gear, I trow, that is not good for ye in battle.'——"

After this indignant rejection of their shameful proposal the battle begins. Byrthnoth in the spirit of chivalry allows the sea-rovers to pass the ford at ebb tide unmolested. The battle goes against him, however. The Danes are too strong for them. The brave old man is cut down fighting gallantly, many have already fallen, and the cowards turn and fly. But the house-carles, his hearth-companions, among whom "it liked him best to be," close round his body and are slain to a man, defending it. It is only evincing once more what the English have shown on many a battle-field, from Hastings to Isandula, that when all is lost but honor they know how to die.

The greatest treasure of our old literature is the long epic poem of Beowulf, mentioned above. It is the legend of the Dragon-Slayer, which we find in so many mythologies, and consists of two episodes—the freeing of Hart-hall from the man-destroying monster Grendel by the hero Beowulf; and secondly, a battle with a fiery dragon or Worm, in which Beowulf, now grown old, is slain in the moment of victory. The lay begins in true saga style with an account of the hero's ancestry. Scyld Scefing had come as a child over the seas in a mysterious ship. At his death, the old monarch is borne, according to his last directions, to his ring-prowed ship, shining and ready in the haven. His faithful thanes lay the body by the mast, heap war-weeds and armour round him, pile fair jewels from far lands on his breast, hoist his golden standard over his head, loose the sail against the wind, and “let the waves bear their gift to the sea.” There is something in this sea-burial that appeals as strongly to the imagination as that other phantom ship which sailed before the visionary eye of Coleridge. I must pass by the various incidents, the midnight wrestle with the monster Grendel in the desolate hall, when he, who had the strength of thirty men, tore out the fiend's right arm, the swimming of Beowulf, and the struggle in the cavern under the mys-

terious pool, and dwell for a moment on the opening episode of the second part.

In it we see depth opening upon depth, and in that distant time men's minds turned upon a time still more distant. A characteristic tone of melancholy pervades it. The situation is one which must have had its parallel in those early days of strife and bloodshed. A whole tribe has been blotted out in some great battle: the few survivors build the burial mound for their dead friends: then one by one they die or wander off till one alone is left: his last duty is to consign the national hoard to the earth. Again I must resort to a rough prose paraphrase, as I cannot hope to reproduce the irregular music of the verse, which is like the break and fall and rush of billow after billow on the beach. It would make a poem by itself with the title, "The Last Man."

"There were many such ancient jewels in that barrow, as a certain man had hid them there with thoughtful mind, the hoard of a noble race, the precious treasures. But death swept them away in by-gone times: and only one man of the nation's war-band who longest lived, mourned the loss of friend, and wished to tarry, that he might for a little while enjoy the long-lasting treasures. The mound, all ready, stood on the plain, near the sea waves, new by the ness, firm,



inaccessible. There in the warden of rings bore a portion hard to carry of the treasure of earls, of beaten gold. Few words spake he.

"Earth! now hold thou, since heroes may not, the treasure of earls. Lo! in thee, aforetime good men got it. Battle-death has swept away, the fearsome life-bale, each one of the men of my people who gave up this life. They saw joyance in hall. No one have I to bear sword or fetch the cup of beaten gold, the precious drinking vessel. Otherwhere is the war-band gone. The hardened helmet inlaid with gold shall let the jewels drop from their settings: they who burnished are fallen asleep, those who should brighten the battle-mask: and likewise the war-sark which bided at battle over the clash of the shields, the bite of the swords, it moulders to dust after the fighter who wore it. Nor may the ringed corslet go far and wide after the war-chief as an aid to the hero. There is no more delight of harp nor play of the glee-wood; nor swingeth goodly hawk through hall, nor does swift steed trample the castle-yard. Mighty death hath sent many of the race of men far away." So sad in mind, he mourned in his grief, the one alone after them all, in sorrow lamented by day and night until the wave of death touched him at the heart."

I would like to dwell on the pathos and Hamlet-

---

\* Beowulf M., 2235—2271.

like gravity of this scene, but time will not permit. A word in closing. I have tried to show that the very beginning of that literature of which we are so justly proud, is worthy of what has followed ; that it is not to be separated from the rest, and that there is food there for the lover of pure poetry, as well as material for the antiquarian and the student of grammar. In regard to this literature, early and late, as a College and as Canadians our attitude should be this. As a band of students we have a plain duty. To cultivate it ourselves and encourage the study of it in others. As a people, as an English colony, we are the undisputed heirs to all that is best in the civilization of the homeland. It is our duty, as well as our right, to hand on the best of that civilization to coming generations. The grand possibilities of this young land cannot be measured. Scholars hold that the poems of Homer were first sung in Asia Minor before they crossed the Egean to become the glory of the land of Greece : and if we but reverence and study our language somewhat as the Greeks studied and revered theirs, the time may come when the fame of English letters shall leave the old continent to be indissolubly linked with the name of a greater England on this side of the sea.

